



2016

America's Hinge Moment

Presidential politics in 2016 will reflect the shifting reality of America.

By DOUG SOSNIK | March 29, 2015

📷 Lead image by AP Photo.

Democratic strategist Doug Sosnik was a close adviser to President Bill Clinton, and he's famed in Washington circles for his closely held, big-think memos on the state of American politics. Here's his latest.

The country is going through the most significant period of change since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Across the United States, we are seeing a convergence of economic, technological and demographic forces that is transforming every aspect of our lives. These changes are all reinforcing each other, adding to the pace and the scale of the disruption.

Despite the upheaval Americans are experiencing, voting patterns in presidential elections have

remained virtually unchanged for the past 25 years—with the majority of states voting the same way in the last six elections. That's not unexpected, even at a time of great change, because elections, in fact, historically have served as lagging indicators—not leading ones—of the direction of the country. Rather than forecasting the future, election results help us make better sense of the past.

The current era in presidential politics has been defined by deep partisan divisions over the same issues and static voting behavior tied to race, ethnicity, gender, age and geography. Even though Democrats have won the popular vote in five out of the past six presidential elections, they have only once been able to get more than 51 percent of the vote.

Now, though, there are signs that the transformation is starting to pick up steam in our elections. Even though we have yet to feel the full impact at the ballot box we're nearing a shift that will signal an inevitable political earthquake.

Years from now we are going to look back at this period of time and see it as a “hinge” moment, a term Princeton Physicist Freeman Dyson used to describe a connection point that ties two historical periods in time, one before and one afterwards.

The University of Virginia historian Philip Zelikow has observed that “for only the third time since the founding of the United States we are in the early or transition phase of a new era in American and global history.” He goes on to say that “from the narrower point of view of economic and social history, however, we are in the early stages of a transition phase faster than anything we have encountered in more than 100 years, the largest since the economic and industrial revolutions of the late 19th and early 20th century.”

As the Industrial Revolution made clear, these kinds of moments don't happen overnight; they build over time. Like then, a series of factors are now contributing to the tipping point we are rapidly approaching—most notably the economic uncertainty, global instability and technological advances that the country is experiencing. On top of these drivers, there is a demographic transformation taking place that is literally changing who we are as a country.

If next year's 2016 presidential election is a close one, the changes that we are now only seeing on the margins could play a significant role in shaping the outcome. In the future, these changes will define our politics deep into this century.

It would be easy to conclude that great change seems unlikely, given the current electoral map. Despite the change that's churning beneath the surface, the electoral map for the last six

presidential elections has remained largely the same—with the majority of states not even remotely competitive. In 31 states plus the District of Columbia (with 344 electoral votes) Americans have voted for the same party in every single one of these elections. In an additional eight states (with 71 electoral votes) Americans have voted for the same party in five out of the past six elections. In the last four elections, six additional states (with 48 electoral votes)—previously carried by Bill Clinton—saw a political realignment that favors the GOP. When taken all together, these states comprise 463 out of a total of 538 electoral votes.

With most states locked in by one party or the other, the presidential contest has largely narrowed to five states that have been consistently competitive in the past six elections: Ohio (which has long been at the 50-yard line of American politics) and four of the fastest growing states in the country—Colorado, Florida, Nevada and Virginia. While these states represent only 15 percent of the population and just 75 electoral votes, they have determined the balance of power in close elections during this period. It should come as no surprise that almost two-thirds of the \$896 million spent on television advertising by both sides in the 2012 presidential general election was spent in just these five states with over half spent in Ohio, Virginia and Florida.

That static map, though, is changing beneath the surface, and the country's shifting demographics will increasingly shape the outcome of future presidential elections.

As recently as 1980, 80 percent of the United States population was white but by 2014 that number had dropped to 63 percent. A recent report, "States of Change," published by the Center for American Progress, the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, projects that whites will be less than 44 percent of the total population by 2060.

The report points out that there are currently four majority-minority states, but it predicts that 22 states will achieve that status by 2060—accounting for about two-thirds of the country's population. Many of these states originally became reliable Republican strongholds when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. But, while the political shifts are occurring at different rates of speed, most of these fast-growing states are no longer solid Republican base states. At a minimum, they are trending competitive for both parties. The changing population will also impact congressional reapportionment, which in turn will shift the distribution of Electoral College votes and steadily increase the clout of the fast-growing states.

We first saw the impact of how these demographic changes can alter the politics of a state back in the 1980s when California rapidly shifted to what is now a solidly Democratic state.

The trend is evident in other states in the South, Southwest and the Inter-mountain West. In Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina and Virginia—areas traditionally associated with Republican Party strength—the population is trending younger and more diverse, and it is becoming more politically competitive for the Democrats. The “States of Change” report projects that over half of these states will have a majority-minority population before 2040.

The country is beginning to feel the full impact from the “fourth wave of immigration” following the passage of immigration reform in 1965, which eliminated quotas based on nationality. This wave is now the largest in history, with the majority of these immigrants coming to our country from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean.

While lagging voter participation among these fast-growing populations has slowed the pace of change in elections, the “States of Change” report projects that the gap between the population and eligible voters will narrow, since future growth will come from the U.S.-born offspring of immigrants.

One of the ramifications from these trends will be that other parts of the country—like the Midwest—will lose clout as these demographic and geographic shifts change the political landscape. During the height of the industrial era, the Midwestern states of Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were ground zero in American politics. As this era winds down, the population in these states is graying and growth is slowing considerably. Illinois is the only exception in the region, with its population shifts mirroring the growth trends in other parts of the country.

Projections show that in the future the electorate in the Midwest will be older than the rest of the country, with whites constituting a higher percentage of the vote than the national average. These voters are increasingly forming the Republican base, which suggests that these states will be more competitive for them in the years ahead. The impact is already being felt at the state and local level as Republicans now hold the governorship in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, and control both legislative chambers in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

As we begin to settle in to a post-industrial, interconnected digital world in an emergent multi-ethnic society, the 2016 presidential campaign is likely to close out a long era in American politics—a shift that is going to change which voters matter and which states matter.

When the industrial economy gathered strength in the last century, the center of political gravity in our country followed this economic growth. In an August 20, 2014, *Wall Street Journal* article, the

Democratic pollster Peter Hart pointed out a truism that has been a central tenet of American politics for the past 100 years: “[T]he single most effective bellwether of a candidate is how they do in the Midwest. It’s not only in the middle of the country, it contains all the central elements and attributes of the country.”

The transformation we’re seeing throughout the country points to an emerging new bellwether. As we come out on the other side of this hinge period, the central elements and attributes of our country will increasingly be reflected by the fast-growing, ethnically diverse states that tend to skew younger than the rest of the country.

Four of the five battleground states that have been decisive in recent presidential elections—Florida, Virginia, Colorado and Nevada—all have the central attributes of 21st century America and will prove to be decisive if 2016 is a close election.

Next year’s election is the midpoint between 1992 when the current phase of presidential politics began and 2040, which is around the time that most projections have us approaching a majority-minority country, one in which no race will constitute the majority of Americans.

While the 2016 presidential election is likely to reflect the last remnants of this bygone era, the candidate running for president in 2016 who best understands how the country is changing and runs a campaign based on the America of the future rather than the America of the past is most likely to be our 45th president.

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